

GRADING/EVALUATION OPTIONS¹

The new reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) now requires parental written notification of the student's progress/lack of progress toward meeting all IEP goals. This must be communicated at least as often as occurs with students without disabilities. For most districts, reporting procedure will therefore need to occur at least as often as each report card period. Although this procedure must be IEP goal specific, the student may also require adaptations of general education grading and evaluating procedures so as to participate in the general grade reporting employed for all students. When modifications have substantially altered a standard or course content, the student will require IEP team determination of what constitutes mastery. The following methods provide ideas for developing grading and evaluation practices that may be potentially effective in an individual situation.

Accommodations are changes in course content, teaching strategies, standards, test presentation, location, timing, scheduling, expectations, student responses, environmental structuring and/or other attributes which provide access for a student with a disability to participate in a course/standard/test, which **DO NOT fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectations of the course/standard/test.**

Modifications are changes in course content, teaching strategies, standards, test presentation, location, timing, scheduling, expectations, student responses, environmental structuring and/or other attributes which provide access for a student with a disability to participate in a course/standard/test, which **DO fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectations of the course/standard/test.**²

IEP Plan

If successful completion of a class or subject area requires grading modifications, because a standard was substantially altered, the subject area and necessary modifications or assessment procedure(s) to determine achievement are noted in the student's individualized education program (IEP). General district report cards then typically note how the assessment was established for evaluating performance. One method some districts have employed is to place an astrix by the grade and including a footnote, such as: "Grade achieved by other methods, see attached." Typically, not all subject areas will require performance evaluation differences and only those grades which reflect changes are so noted. If the student achieves the same outcome as all students, e.g., produces three

¹Comments and expansion by Diana Browning Wright, based on an initial outline of grading options by Judy Montgomery in *Special Edge*, Sept/Oct 1994, *Resources in Special Education*. Updated for recent OCR rulings, Calif. Dept. of Ed. documents and IDEA Reauthorization

²The definitions of accommodations and modifications are with permission of the author, from: "Assessment and Evaluation of Students with Disabilities: The Legal Requirements that Regular and Special Educators Need to Know in Working with Students with Disabilities in the 'General Curriculum' ", a presentation by Miriam Kurtzig Freedman, M.A., J.D. at the LRP 20th National Institute on Educating Individuals with Disabilities, San Francisco, April, 1999.

quality pieces of work for the portfolio, but requires input or output modifications, e.g., reports are dictated, an alternative video is produced, etc., this is not noted on the report card because a standard was not substantially altered. Some districts, however, chose to note accommodations, such as “All written products were produced utilizing dictation procedures but course standards were met.”

Impact: *Everyone working with the student is aware of evaluation methods, standards and modifications. This results in a reduction in unauthorized grade alternations based on subjective impressions of what “successful” performance. With this system in place, any direct service provider has the information necessary to evaluate progress.*

Caution: *Recent OCR rulings have concluded that transcripts can not denote “special education,” that modifications must be available for all students on a case by case basis, and grading procedures that differ from those employed for most students must NOT be employed unilaterally for a group of students (e.g., all students with I.E.P.). Modifications must be individually determined.*

Written Report

Students with disabilities receive an alternative written report from the general education teachers’ and/or the special education teacher.

Impact: *Many parents note that they do not understand by objective standards whether or not expected, acceptable progress has been made unless very detailed information is conveyed. Additionally, if the special education teacher grades progress for performance occurring in a general education teacher’s class, difficulties for both the student and the educators occur. In general, the educator directly teaching the student is in the best position to evaluate progress if the criteria for evaluation are clearly understood. Otherwise, issues of “ownership” and “fully belonging” to the class reduce the extent to which the student is truly a member of the class in question. Additionally, since I.D.E.A. mandates informing parents on progress toward all goals mastery (and whether or not success is anticipated by the end of the IEP reporting period) this would generate lengthy reports.*

Portfolio Approaches

The student and/or teacher maintains a portfolio for the report card period or for the year. Work is appraised by the student and teacher (frequently with periodic parent participation), and reported regularly on the portfolio form.

Impact: *Permanent products (videos/drawings/written work) lend themselves to objective measurement of progress. However, much progress and proficiency achievement is not easily fully captured in a product (e.g., critical oral reasoning skill, collaborative work skills, reading rate and comprehension). Therefore, this approach is typically augmented by other evaluative and reporting methods. The products should be reviewed primarily by the instructor, though consultation services from special education providers can be helpful.*

Three Grade System

Students receive grades in each subject based on ability, effort and achievement.

Impact: Estimates of “ability” are not easily objectively made and are sometimes influenced by prejudices and other factors such as race, cultural, and socio-economical differences between the evaluators and the student as well as expectation based on previous experience with other family members or information provided by previous teachers. “Effort” is in the eye of the beholder and often does not account fully for the disability, e.g., reduced language comprehension resulting in lack of understanding, disengaged behavior, and so forth. “Achievement” still requires a standard of comparison, e.g., to the class norm, to district benchmarks, to an individual student’s IEP. Without careful planning, this system can result in disappointing results, e.g., a student working as hard as possible, yet still receiving low marks no matter what he/she does who therefore becomes discouraged, suffers a loss in self-esteem and stops striving for success.

Averaged Grades

General educators and support teachers grade student work, then report the average on the standard report card.

Impact: Objective standards for evaluation still need to be developed prior to employing this method. For example, if there is wide disparity between evaluators, e.g., “A” by a special education teacher’s appraisal, “D” by a general educator’s evaluation, simply averaging the result does not provide for collaborative development of alternate assessment methodology but rather passes on the disparity to the student.

Percentage Systems

Students receive grades based on the type of required work in each subject area (i.e., tests class work, group work, attendance, projects done at home). Students negotiate work output with teachers, or educators and parents decide the relative weight of each component part.

Impact: This system is a “curriculum accommodation” for work output reduction. If the measurable achievement/proficiency is ultimately the same as for non-disabled peers the grading can be the same. Thus, the work output might be reduced so that a project done at home might receive an 80% designation and in-class essays might constitute only 20% of the grade for a specific student with a disability. This can be very encouraging for students whose difficulties affect output. They often feel overwhelmed by extensive written product demands occurring in a time frame that is difficult for them to meet. The non-disabled student might receive the opposite evaluative weight, e.g., home project 20%, written test 80%. If, however, the achievement/proficiency attained by the student with a disability is lower than for the non-disabled peers, this system would require augmentation by other approaches in order to best communicate progress.

Curriculum-based Measurements

Pre- and post- test students on new learning. The degree of mastery/improvement required to achieve success is set by the teacher. Students receive grades based on their own pre- and post-test change.

Impact: *This approach maximizes objectivity, but still requires standards of “success” be established that considers the student’s output ability, e.g., how much work must be undertaken prior to attempts to pass a post-test; what form should the testing take--oral or written? Additionally, if ultimate achievement standards are less than typical peers, the IEP team must address what constitutes acceptable progress and how will the disability be considered. Some skills are difficult to measure with this system, e.g., group collaboration skills to produce projects. Too great a reliance on this method can result in a preponderance of rote learning and individual paper work production, reducing class opportunities for meaningful, hands-on, discovery learning that increases the involvement and attending skills of many students with disabilities.*

Pass/Fail

Students receive a pass or fail.

Impact: *Over-reliance on this method gives tacit approval to minimal performance, reducing the student’s striving for success. Alternatively, if course requirements are impossibly high, students will often stop trying because they sense the futility. In classwork for which evaluation is qualitative, e.g., drama, art, music, this system can be successful for students with disabilities, coupled with other methods such as a written narrative reporting of progress.*

Daily Grades/Report Card Summatives

Students are graded daily on predetermined criteria. The report card grade is the average of approximately nine weeks of daily grades.

Impact: *Without alteration, this system does not easily allow for cumulative projects as daily monitoring of progress is difficult. This system does clearly communicate to students and parents expected performance across predetermined parameters and can be motivating and increase home/school performance when parents participate in “Daily Report Card” systems. Keeping up with the more objective evaluations that are likely to be reflected on the daily report card, e.g., quizzes and tests, can be challenging. Relative weight issues must be considered prior to use of this system, e.g., is a chapter final test on Friday to receive more weight than a quiz on Monday?*

Contract Systems

Students develop a contract with the teacher for a grade of A or B or C, with the amount and quality of work, type and frequency of expected behavior arranged in advance.

Impact: *Students often agree to, and teachers often set impossibly high work-output standards or behavioral expectations that result in failure. Alternatively, if the student easily masters the goal, should the teacher establish additional contingencies (thereby not respecting the contract) when performance standards were inadvertently set too low? This system may also increase student motivation to finish rapidly without regard for output quality. Therefore, quality issues must be directly addressed. Potential failure to attain performance mastery on oral and written testing, in spite of completing all assigned work, must also be considered in the plan. For example, is there a built in repeat of assignments or alternative assignment completion requirement occurring at intervals if mastery is not shown on a test, prior to moving to the next contract goal? Changing input or output requirements is often critical for students with disabilities and, therefore needs to be carefully considered for most students with disabilities. Simply reducing quantity of work is not often successful without these changes as well.*

Group Grading

Each person in a cooperative learning group privately grades every other person in their group based on the contribution made to the group product. These grades are averaged by the teacher with his/her assigned grade and then reported.

Impact: *The entire group will need information as to what constitutes acceptable contribution for all, and perhaps what constitutes acceptable contribution for the student with a disability who possibly contributes differently due to the disability and may require more peer support for achievement.*

Alternative Class Titles/Same Physical Environment

The student in high school attends a particular class, based on the IEP team's assessment of the potential of that environment to assist in meeting the individual's IEP goals and objectives. However, it is known that he or she can not achieve mastery to the same standard as the peers in that class environment. An alternative class title is designated, e.g., "physical science experiences" or "independent learning center - physical science," rather than the course title of the other students, e.g., "physics." The student attends the class and completes a predetermined series of the regularly occurring activities, typically with substantial modifications, or completes alternative work during the class time.

Impact: *With this method, students with disabilities will be evaluated differently from their peers based on alternate assessments. Class standing (often computer calculated by grades) that affects college acceptances of non-disabled peers is not affected because the grade of the students is not included in the class standing for all students. High school teachers concerned with upholding curriculum standards and resistant to modifications or the use of alternate assessments for students with disabilities are often less resistant when this method is employed. More environments are made available to meet students' needs and more "inclusion" opportunities are available, but course standards are not reduced for the group as a whole.*

Parents and educators must fully understand the different objectives for this student participating in learning activities in this environment and the activities and objectives of non-disabled peers in this environment. Progress must be reported frequently and peers must be given enough information to encourage social acceptance.

Caution: *This is not a viable option for students for whom accommodations alone are sufficient, i.e., no change in course mastery or substantive change in standards to be met are anticipated. These students, needing only accommodations, require interventions that result in an equal opportunity to earn grades based on standards achievement. These students do not require modifications that substantially alter course standards and should therefore be enrolled in the class as designated for all students in the room.*

As was mentioned in "IEP Plan" above, this procedure must be individually determined (not exclusively for one group in a district) and must be available potentially for all students. This procedure maximizes L.R.E. opportunity and is often considered for individuals with severe disabilities.